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Publications
QUARTO SER.
of the
Cambridge Antiquarian Society.



Vol. no. 7

N^o. VII.

**A DESCRIPTION OF THE SEXTRY BARN AT ELY,
LATELY DEMOLISHED.**

CAMBRIDGE:
PRINTED AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS.
**PUBLISHED BY J. & J. J. DEIGHTON, AND T. STEVENSON;
JOHN W. PARKER, LONDON;
AND
J. H. PARKER, OXFORD.**

M.DCCC.XLIII.

A
DESCRIPTION
OF THE
SEXTRY BARN AT ELY,
LATELY DEMOLISHED.

BY
ROBERT WILLIS, M.A., &c.
JACKSONIAN PROFESSOR IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE.

WITH FOUR PLATES.

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A DESCRIPTION
OF THE
SEXTRY BARN AT ELY.

THE Tithe-Barn at Ely, which it is my present purpose to describe, occupied the south side of a large farm-yard, which joins the western side of St Mary's church-yard. This farm-yard is of an irregular figure, and there were other ancient buildings on the east and north sides, especially a gateway next to the road, which still remains. These buildings had been, however, so changed and mutilated in the course of time, as to leave little worth recording, except the barn itself. This was commonly known by the name of the Sextry Barn (or Sacrist's Barn), because in the old time, the office of collecting the Tithes, for the reception of which this building was erected, belonged to the Sacrist of the monastery.

The structure had, however, from its great age, its originally rude construction, and the patchwork of its repairs, arrived at a state which made it so exceedingly difficult and expensive to keep it together, that the Dean and Chapter were compelled to order its demolition, which took place in October last. As I happened to be on the spot, I took the opportunity to make the sketches and measurements which form the subject of the following pages.

The sketches consist of a plan (fig. 11), a transverse section (fig. 4), a sufficient portion of the longitudinal section (fig. 10), an elevation of the eastern gable (fig. 1), and some details on a larger scale.

The building was somewhat irregular in its plan; for the eastern gable was placed at an angle of 97° to the south wall, to accommodate the figure of the field in which it stood: the mean length of the interior was 219 feet 6 inches, and the breadth between the walls, 39 feet 5 inches.

The side walls were 12 feet 8 inches high, and about 4 feet thick: the roof was supported by a double range of oak piers or posts, ten on each side, which divided the apartment into a central aisle and side-aisles, after the fashion of a church. Each of these posts was placed upon a block of stone, 2 feet square, and 1 foot 8 inches high, chamfered on the upper edges, and founded upon two courses of irregular masonry,

the thirteenth century. No record however of its erection has been preserved.

These details are perhaps more interesting to the architect than to the antiquary; but there is yet one point from which I conceive the building in question to derive a more general interest.

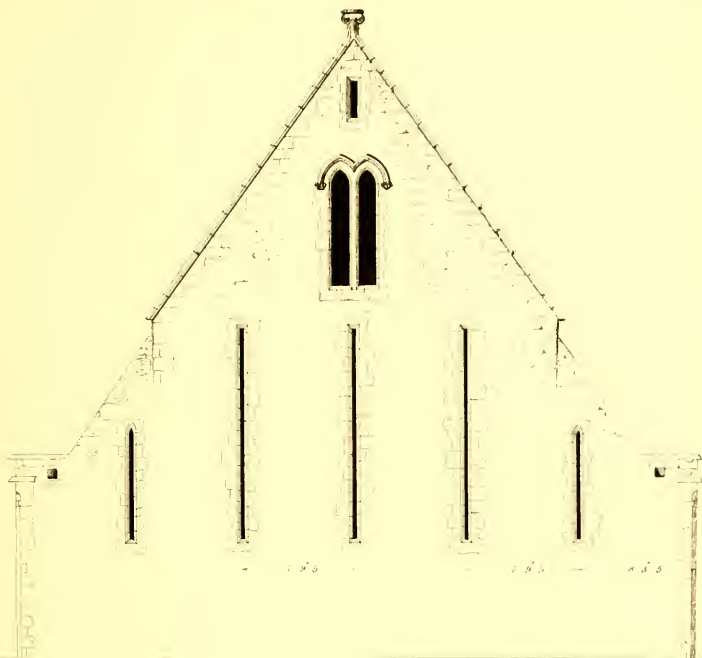
The anonymous writers of the Camden Society have insisted very strongly upon the symbolical nature of the arrangement of a church into nave and side aisles, as involving the sacred number three, and have not only endeavoured to persuade their readers that this was an original motive for this division, but that it ought to be adhered to still for the same reason. I believe the original motive to have been purely derived from reasons of construction, and indeed the history of architecture shews it to have been so; still, knowing as we do the superstitious habits of our forefathers, it might have been supposed that this triple arrangement, once adopted by the architect, was sanctified by its employment in sacred buildings. But as it can be shewn from many examples, that, even in the middle ages, the same triple arrangement of aisles was employed for large halls and other secular buildings, whenever the span was too great to allow of the absence of pillars; and also that in sacred buildings, whenever the desired span was too great to admit of three aisles alone, they never hesitated to employ four or five; we must abandon the notion that the sacred or mystical meaning was allowed to influence this arrangement.

Many examples might be adduced to prove this, but I shall content myself at present with having pointed out for one the Sextry Barn at Ely; and shall conclude by indicating its violation of another symbolical maxim of the Ecclesiologists, which it is perhaps less necessary to dwell upon, because they seem to have been at length reluctantly compelled to give it up. This barn had a triple group of windows at the east end, and also at the west. These externally were mere slits, and in the elevation (fig. 1) it seems as if there were five, but the lateral short ones belong to the side aisles. Internally the three central ones of the nave expanded into broad well proportioned windows, so that the triplet, so symbolically sacred, according to the Ecclesiologists, that it ought never to be employed even at the west end of a church, was here to be found at both ends of a mediæval barn.

ROBERT WILLIS.

MAY 1, 1843.

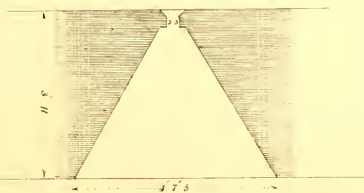
Fig 1



Scale $\frac{1}{8}$ to 1 foot

Elevation of the Eastern Gable of Big Barn.

Fig 2



PLAN OF WINDOWS
($\frac{1}{8}$ to a foot)

Fig 3.

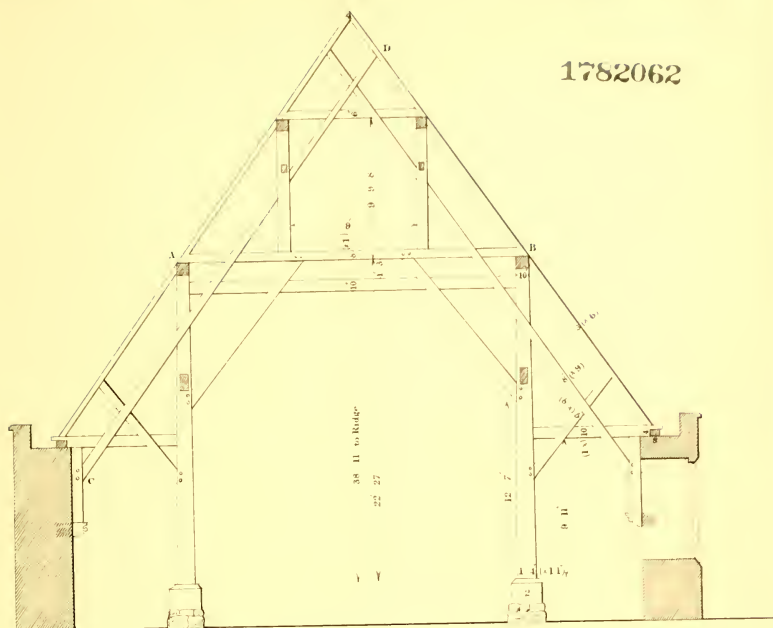
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SECTION OF ARCH (A Fig 10.)

Fig. 1

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Scale of $\frac{1}{8}$ to a foot

Transverse Action of Gly Tern.

Fig 3

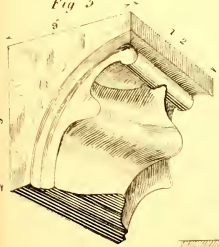


Fig. 6

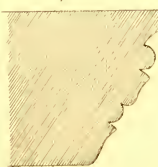


Fig. 7

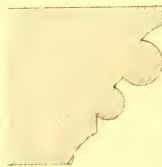


Fig. 8

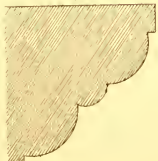


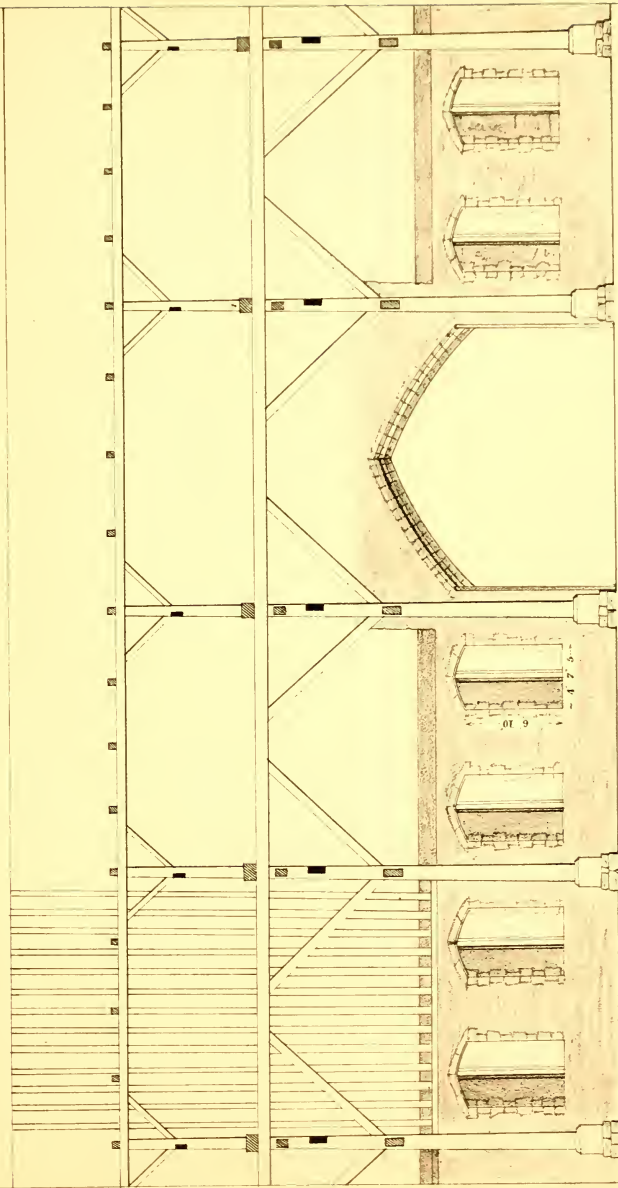
Fig 9



CORBELS



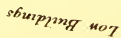
Fig 10.



Scale $\frac{1}{4}$ in to a foot

Longitudinal Section of Big Cairn

Church Yard of S. Mary



John G. G. Barn

